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ABSTRACT

Public service advertisements, disseminated via the mass media, have been credited with "positive attitudinal effects" in past research, but only certain kinds of such advertisements are really effective. Of the types of appeals used in television commercials--informative, emotional, "establishment" (or status quo), and fear--the establishment appeal had the least favorable effect on a test group of 248 sophomore college students. In fact, both the establishment and information-based appeals elicited decidedly negative attitudinal responses from those surveyed, although older, more socially secure, and female respondents tended to favor such appeals. Emotional appeals were most effective with all the respondents, even overcoming fatalism. The test results suggest the production of public service advertisements for specific subgroups of television viewers. (CH)

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MESSAGE EFFECTS OF PUBLIC SERVICE ADVERTISING

BY

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Public service advertising (psa) is designed to promote individual and group response to social problems. There are three general sources of psa: the firm which uses it as a form of institutional advertising, the association which promotes specific causes, i.e., The March of Dimes, and perhaps the most active source, The Advertising Council, a non-profit organization supported by media, advertising agencies, advertiser organizations, and private firms.

Psa seems to be growing in importance and in volume. The Advertising Council alone claims an annual exposure level for its messages of more than $450 million in equivalent space and time costs. Nearly every imaginable cause is supported by some form of psa. Moreover, there is great proliferation with, in many cases, several different sources promoting the same cause in different ways. Drug abuse prevention, for example, is promoted by: The Advertising Council, several governmental agencies, and countless private firms, educational institutions, and civic organizations.

Despite the growing importance and pervasiveness of psa, there has been little empirical investigation of its effect beyond isolated evaluations of specific psa campaigns.[1] One study[2] investigated source effects and concluded that one source attribute -- credibility -- was positively related to psa message evaluation. That study suggested several additional areas of inquiry, particularly the need for information on specific psa message evaluations and the relationships between such message effects and audience characteristics.

This study explored psa message evaluation and the relationship of selected audience demographic and personality characteristics.

Message Evaluation

Any number of message constructs (persuasiveness, comprehension, recall, etc.) could be used as a measure of psa message evaluation. However, the purpose of this study was to determine if audiences perceive basic psa message types; a general message evaluation instrument (agree-disagree) was therefore adopted.

Message evaluation was defined in this study as agreement with 23 different psa television commercials (film) as recorded on five-interval scales.

Fatalism

Since very little is known about the effect of psa on audiences, several personality characteristics could be used to examine the relationship between different message types and different people. It seemed appropriate, however, even at this exploratory stage, to select a personality dimension which appeared relevant to the issue of psa evaluation. The personality construct used in this study was fatalism, or internal-external control of reinforcement.

If reinforcement is perceived as the result of chance or fate, as a function of others, or a complex unpredictable force, then this is belief in external control (fatalism). If a person considers reinforcement to be a function of his own behavior, then this is belief in internal control.[3]

A high fatalist therefore believes that he is primarily directed by external forces which he cannot control.

Fatalism has been found to be a deterrent to growth in developing countries.[4] Several studies have also suggested a negative relationship between fatalism and information sensitivity (a tendency for the high fatalist to maintain spending decision positions regardless of preceding reward information)[5] and on spending behavior (high fatalists respond only to reward explanation messages).[6]

Since the major purpose of psa is to stimulate individual and group response to social problems, an examination of the relationship between fatalism and psa message evaluation seems particularly important. If psa is to succeed, it must overcome any tendency of the high fatalist to reject such persuasion on the basis of belief in external forces.

Summary

Questions explored in this study are: how do people evaluate psa messages?; do people perceive psa message types?; what relationship exists between fatalism and psa message agreement and psa message types?; how are demographic characteristics related to psa message agreement and psa message types?

Hypotheses

There were two main phases in this study:

Phase 1. an examination of psa message agreement. R-factor analysis of responses to 23 psa commercials on five-interval scales was

used in this phase. This area was exploratory and therefore the hypothesis was informal. The purpose of this phase was to see if people perceive specific psa message types (a message type would be a cluster of messages which the respondents perceived as being similar to each other but unlike those in other clusters or types) and to attempt to explain the factors underlying the message types.

H_1: a factor analytic solution will reveal that the respondents perceive different psa message types which can be interpreted according to an underlying message factor.

Phase 2. an analysis of relationships between fatalism, demographic characteristics, and message agreement. Multiple regression was utilized in this phase which optimizes prediction of the dependent variable by deriving weights for each independent variable and a constant weight. The proportion of variance each independent variable accounts for is determined and tested with the F-ratio.

H_2: Fatalism and selected audience characteristics will account for significant variance in psa message agreement.

H_{2a}: Fatalism is negatively related to psa message agreement.

Procedure and Statistical Technique

Data were collected from 248 non-selective University of Tennessee sophomores. While a narrow segment of society, the sample contained a wide range of academic interest and socio-economic status, and nearly equal representation of males and females.

The respondents were exposed to a series of 23 psa TV commercials

which included a variety of social issues, creative formats, and sources. All commercials were in color and were 60 seconds in length. The social issues and message sources are given in Table 1.

Time was provided for the respondents to evaluate each commercial after its showing on a strongly agree - agree somewhat - neutral - disagree somewhat - disagree strongly - basis. Agreement-disagreement polarity was randomly altered to avoid response-set bias. Specific message components (appeals used, production quality, issues involved) were purposely not manipulated. The respondents were told that they were going to see a series of filmed messages; they were instructed to evaluate each message on an agreement-disagreement basis; a sample scale was provided and special instructions were given on message-agreement polarity.

Following the message evaluation procedure, which took less than 29 minutes, respondents completed the fatalism scale consisting of 29 forced-choice statements including six filler items designed to disguise the test. Scores on the fatalism scale are the total number of external or fatalistic choices.[7] The final procedure was collection of demographic data: age (nearest birthday), sex, and socio-economic status. The Duncan scale index, which is an interval-data instrument derived from occupational category and education, was used to measure socio-economic status.[8] Since the respondents were all students, they were asked to identify the occupation of the head of their immediate family. All data were collected in less than one hour.

Responses to the psa message agreement instrument were submitted to R-factor analysis which indicated the extent to which the messages covaried

over the respondents. A principal factor solution was used with orthogonal (varimax) rotation. A minimum eigenvalue of 1.0 was adopted as a stop-factor criterion.

Four psa message factors were determined by Scree Test which accounted for 71 percent of the total variance. Each of the four message factors contained commercials which were seen as related by the respondents but not related to commercials in the other factors. Correlations among all pairs of messages are given in Table 2; correlations among the factors are given in Table 3.

In order to examine relationships between audience characteristics and specific psa message agreement types, factor scores (z-scores) were computed for each respondent on all four message types. This procedure required multiplying the factor score coefficients by respondents' weighted factor loadings (individual message score - mean message score/standard deviation). This resulted in a z-score array for the 248 subjects and the four psa message factors.

In the subsequent regression analysis, the z-scores were used as interval-data dependent variables and the audience characteristics were independent variables.

The regression analysis identified the variance that the independent variables accounted for in message agreement. The first regression program used the subjects' total psa message evaluation scores for all 23 commercials. In an effort to examine the value of factor analysis in predicting relationships, four additional programs were then used with z-scores for each of the four psa message types.

The F-ratio was used to test the significance of variance accounted for in each program. An alpha level of .05 was adopted.

Results

Message Factors

In phase one, a four factor solution was found. Loadings from the varimax-rotated factor matrix are given in Table 4.

Factor 1. Nine of the psa commercials clustered in this factor (aging, bicycle safety, better vision, forest fire prevention, equal employment, blasting cap identification, better teaching, vietnamization, physical fitness). An interpretation of the issues involved was unsatisfactory. An examination of the creative approaches used in the messages suggested a more meaningful interpretation. All nine messages in this factor employed direct, unemotional, informative approaches to the issues involved; "how to," educational appeals were used.

Given below are the three psa messages, and their loadings, which best represent factor 1:

Aging (.6698)

Bicycle Safety (.6256)

Better Vision (.4636)

Factor 2. This factor contained eight of the psa commercials (Peace Corps, Vista, pollution, C.A.R.E., mental retardation, muscular dystrophy, love, United Nations). Again, the approach, rather than issues, seems to identify the underlying factor of this message type. All eight commercials had very compassionate, emotional appeals.

One message however (Vista), had similar loadings on factors 1 and 2 and a communality of .303. Close examination of the message reveals both an emotional appeal to economic opportunity for minority groups and an educational format describing the procedures used by Vista to insure such opportunity.

These three commercials best represent factor 2:

C.A.R.E. (.5620)

United Nations (.4977)

Mental Retardation (.3808)

Factor 3. This factor contains four psa commercials (Drug abuse prevention, Marine Corps recruitment, U.S. Savings Bonds, and rehabilitation of the handicapped -- Hurrah). Issues again do not adequately explain this factor. For the most part, the messages are "establishment" appeals. While the issues are diverse (drugs, the military, saving), the approach may have been perceived as governmental authoritarianism. Indeed, there was a general expression of cynicism from the respondents when most of these commercials were shown.

The Hurrah message, which does not seem establishment oriented, is factorially complex with rather low loadings on factors 1, 2, and 3.

The three psa messages which best represent this factor are:

Drug abuse prevention (.6009)

Marine Corps recruitment (.4533)

U.S. Savings Bonds (.4072)

Factor 4. This factor contained only two messages (car theft prevention and "do something" by the PTA). However, of the entire series of commercials in this study, these were the only two which used fear appeals. Both contained scenes which explicitly revealed the devasting effects of auto collisions and mainlining hard drugs. The drama and shock value of these two psa messages had a noticeable effect on the respondents. The messages and their loadings are:

PTA (.3879)

Car theft prevention (.1940)

Hypothesis 1 was accepted. The respondents did perceive specific psa message types which were interpreted according to underlying message approaches.

Summary of Phase 1

The four psa message types that were evidently perceived by these respondents seem to reflect message approach used rather than social issue involved. This may not be a generalized reaction to psa messages among all segments of society. Perception of approach rather than issue could have been an artifact of the forced exposure situation, however, instructions to the respondents did not specify either form or content. But, regardless of that issue, the creators of psa messages would do well to consider that creative execution could very well overwhelm issues to the detriment of effective communication. If, for example, audiences perceive fear, emotion, or the "establishment" rather than car theft prevention, pollution, or Savings Bonds, then the objectives of psa may not be met.

Message and Receiver Relationships

The mean psa message evaluation for all commercials was 91.5. With five-interval scales and a possible total score of 115, this mean represents an evaluation of 3.98 ("agree somewhat"). Table 5 gives the mean score for each commercial.

To test the efficacy of predicting message factor relationships, a preliminary regression program was conducted with each respondent's total psa agreement score as the dependent variable and fatalism, sex, age, and socio-economic status as independent variables. The individual psa scores ranged from a low of 60 (2.6, "disagree somewhat") to a high of 110 (4.8, nearly "strongly agree."). Fatalism scores ranged from 3 to 21 out of a possible total of 23; the mean was 11.2.

This analysis accounted for only 2.9 percent of the variance in overall psa message agreement. F-ratios for all independent variables were far below that needed for significance. While there was a wide range of agreement of all psa messages, the audience characteristics were not effective predictors.

Psa message agreement was then more rigorously analyzed with the four derived message types and fatalism, sex, age, and socio-economic status.

Factor 1 Relationships (informative appeals). The independent variables accounted for 3.16 percent of the variance in factor 1 evaluations. Two independent variables accounted for significant proportions of variance (fatalism, RSQ=.015, F=3.62; male sex, RSQ=.01, F=2.97). Both variables had negative correlations with the factor 1 message type.

Factor 2 Relationships (emotional appeals). The independent variables accounted for only ½ of one percent of the variance in the factor 2 psa message type. None of the variables had any predictive value.

Factor 2 Relationships ("establishment" appeals). The independent variables accounted for 9.2 percent of the variance in the factor 3 message type. All predictors were significant. A summary of the relationships found in this analysis is given in Table 6. Again, fatalism and male sex are negatively related to agreement of this message type.

Factor 4 Relationships (fear appeals). The independent variables accounted for 3.8 percent of the variance in factor 4 message evaluations. None of the independent variables accounted for significant variance in the message type.

Summary

Very little variance in overall psa message agreement was accounted for by the selected characteristics of the respondents. By using the four derived message factor types as dependent variables, however, there was substantial improvement in prediction in two message types -- informative and "establishment" appeals. It seems clear that by utilizing factor analysis to more rigorously examine message agreement dimensions, a more fruitful analysis is possible of relationship between audience characteristics and psa message agreement.

It appears from these data that, with two exceptions, the standard demographics of sex, age, and socio-economic status are not generally effective predictors of psa message evaluation. This seems true also (although to a lesser extent) of the personality construct, fatalism.

One exception is with "establishment" appeals where significant relationships were found between all predictors and message agreement. It is important to note that male sex and fatalism are negatively related to this message agreement factor. This was found also in the relationship between these two variables and the factor 1 message type (informative appeals). Despite these exceptions, Hypotheses 2 and 2a were rejected.

These findings may suggest that attitudes toward fear and emotional appeals are not predictable on the basis of age, sex, socio-economic status or belief in internal or external control of environment. The hypothesized relationship between fatalism and message agreement only revealed itself with informative and establishment appeals. Of course, appeals which seemingly reflect establishment opinion may generate a wider range of agreement (or disagreement) among college-student groups. This in itself, could account for the greater variance accounted for in factor 3.

The small amount of variance accounted for in these analyses may be a function of selecting inappropriate independent variables. It may also be a function of the narrow segment of society represented in the sample. But it could also be consistent (and this would be a more serious outcome) with the factor analytic interpretation, i.e., the respondents perceived appeals, not issues, and establishment appeals generated very low scores on agreement while there were rather positive scores on psa messages in general.

Summary and Conclusions

Public service advertising attempts to induce awareness of and action on social problems. It is a common form of mass communication and emanates from many different sources. Preliminary investigations have suggested that perception of source credibility are positively related to psa message

evaluation. Far too little, however, is known about this type of persuasion.

This study attempted an analysis of psa message and receiver effects with a group of 248 respondents by obtaining message agreement evaluations, factoring the responses, and examining the relationships between the message factors and selected personal characteristics.

The major findings of this study are:

1. there is a wide range of psa message evaluation; "establishment" oriented messages (Marine Corps, Savings Bonds, Drug abuse prevention) scored low (disagreement).

2. four psa message types were perceived; factors underlying the message types appear to be creative approaches or appeals (informative, emotional, establishment, fear) rather than social issues.

3. fatalism is negatively related to establishment and informative message types; the high fatalist disagrees with both types of messages.

4. age, female sex, and socio-economic status are positively related to establishment message types; older, more socially secure, and females more so than males, tend to agree with establishment appeals.

This study is the second in a systematic series on the effects of psa. None of the studies, in themselves, are conclusive. Much more research is needed.

The methodology employed here should be attempted with other segments of society -- young children and adult groups. A controlled field experiment would undoubtedly lend greater realism than the laboratory experiment. Media exposure patterns of individuals must be examined in light of psa message placement. Behavioral responses to psa should also be explored.

Unitl these areas are examined, the evidence to date suggests that more effective psa will result if the source is made more salient on the basis of credibility and if message appeals are carefully chosen for intended audiences but not over-played at the expense of the issues.

FOOTNOTES

1. For example, J. Richard Udry, "Mass Media Advertising and Contraceptive Use," and Daniel Horn, "Anti-Smoking Advertising Campaigns: Obstacles and Results," papers presented at the 1973 Conference of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, Asnville, N. C., May, 1973.

2. Jerry R. Lynn, "Audience Perception of Public Service Advertising," Journalism Quarterly, Vol. 50, No. 2, 1973, pp. (in press).

3. Julian B. Rotter, "Generalized Expectancies for Internal Versus External Control of Reinforcement," Psychological Monographs: General and Applied, Vol. 80, No. 1, 1966, pp. 1-28.

4. See: Richard D. Lambert, "The Social and Psychological Determinants of Savings and Investments in Developing Societies," in B. F. Koselitz and Wilbert, E. McAre (eds.), Industrialization and and Society, Mouton, France, UNESCO, 1960, pp. 116-132; and Daniel Lerner and Schramm, Wilbur (eds.), Communication and Change in the Developing Countries, Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1967; and Wilbur Schramm, Mass Media and Natural Development, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964.

5. P. E. Green, Halbert, M. H., and Robinson, P. J., "Canonical Analysis: An Exposition and Illustrative Application," Journal of Marketing Research, Vol. 3, February, 1966, pp. 32-39.

6. R. Nielsen, "Message Content Sensitivity, Fatalism, and Spending Behavior," paper presented to Advertising Division of the Association for Education in Journalism, Carbondale, Illinois, August, 1972.

7. The entire I-E scale may be found in Rotter, op. cit., pp. 11-12.

8. Albert J. Riess, Jr., Duncan, O. D., Hatt, P. K., and North, C. C., Occupations and Social Status, New York: The Free Press, 1961.

TABLE 1

PSA ISSUES AND SOURCES

Commercial Number	ISSUE	SOURCE
1	Peace Corps "Aquarius"	Advertising Council
2	Forest Fire Prevention "The Bomb"	Advertising Council
3	Rehabilitation of Handicapped "HURRAH"	Advertising Council
4	Drug Abuse "Why do you think they call it Dope?"	(National Clearing-house for Drug Abuse Information) Advertising Council
5	U.S. Savings Bonds "Retirement"	Advertising Council
6	Equal Employment "Ray Charles"	Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
7	Car Theft "Remove Your Keys"	(U.S. Department of Justice) Advertising Council
8	Marine Corp Recruitment "testimonials"	U.S. Marine Corps
9	Blasting Caps "identification" Don't TOUCH	Institute of Makers of Explosives, N.Y.
10	Economic Opportunity "Vista" ("Impact" development of black business)	Office of Economic Opportunity
11	Aging "President's Advisor"	President's Special Assistant on Aging, Director of the National Conference on Aging
12	Pollution "Indian"	Advertising Council
13	India--refugees "CARE"	CARE
14	Bike Safety "Instruction--Inspection"	Bicycle Institute of America with the U.S. Public Health Service

TABLE 1 Continued

15	Mental Retardation "Barbara Streisand"	National Association for Retarded Children
16	Education "Student Involvement"	National Education Association
17	Muscular Dystrophy	The march against Muscular Dystrophy
18	Better Vision with good habits "Here Comes the Band"	Better Vision Institute
19	Love When someone doesn't like himself, that's when he needs your love	Telespot R.I.D.S. Communication Commission
20	The Force of Reason United Nations "Leaders fight WW III"	U.N. Association
21	Crime, Pollution, Drug Abuse "Do Something About It"	PTA National Congress of Parents and Teachers
22	Vietnamization Operation "Helping Hand"	Operation Helping Hand Foundation
23	Physical Fitness "Youth Program"	The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports

TABLE 2

CORRELATIONS AMONG ALL PAIRS OF PSA COMMERCIALS[a]

	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23
1	03	-04	14	09	14	-06	01	11	13	-05	-01	18	14	04	05	07	19	11	03	12	07	08
2		17	02	12	11	-09	08	12	05	08	03	06	23	09	13	06	16	-05	02	10	10	04
3			16	11	04	04	07	17	05	11	09	11	24	15	18	00	13	14	12	12	10	03
4				24	-14	-06	26	08	-06	01	-01	08	08	04	07	-03	00	03	-06	14	14	04
5					-02	13	17	07	09	-00	-01	-01	05	13	04	13	10	-01	-03	21	09	10
6						04	-07	19	38	23	07	16	15	07	20	17	28	11	22	20	13	05
7							-06	-01	-03	-07	-03	-14	00	-02	-08	05	-05	00	05	-01	-01	-04
8								00	-13	13	-03	-03	13	-05	05	-04	-05	04	-10	11	28	17
9									14	22	08	20	29	05	19	14	30	20	19	07	25	00
10										23	10	20	25	18	25	13	20	15	19	19	14	18
11											02	14	42	21	35	20	39	12	10	17	31	23
12												06	-02	04	-03	10	09	09	21	-01	05	08
13													14	28	11	23	13	17	23	03	16	05
14														17	31	11	38	-00	04	19	24	22
15															24	25	19	18	16	03	09	12
16																12	26	17	13	18	17	24
17																	14	-00	20	14	08	13
18																		13	05	24	21	29
19																			19	14	07	20
20																				13	-02	06
21																					13	21
22																						23

[a]Decimal points omitted; numbers refer to commercials as listed in Table 1.

TABLE 3

CORRELATIONS AMONG VARIMAX FACTORS

	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
Factor 1	-.54	-.15	-.09
Factor 2		.82	.02
Factor 3			.14

TABLE 4

LOADINGS AND THE PSA COMMERCIALS PER FACTOR

PSA Message	ID	Factor 1: (Informative) 1	2	3	4
Aging	(11)	.6698	.1095	-.0408	-.1215
Bicycle Safety	(14)	.6256	.0798	.1010	-.0478
Better Vision	(18)	.5636	.1957	-.0267	.1040
Better Teaching	(16)	.4698	.2039	.0401	.0043
Vietnamization	(22)	.4208	.0672	.2408	-.0809
Physical Fitness	(23)	.3735	.0813	.1197	.1265
Equal Employment	(6)	.3270	.3190	-.2555	.2228
Blasting Cap ID	(9)	.3186	.2952	.0760	-.0763
Forest Fires	(2)	.2331	.0533	.1033	.0075

PSA Message	ID	Factor 2: (Emotional) 1	2	3	4
C.A.R.E.	(13)	.1035	.5620	.0950	-.2440
United Nations	(20)	.0338	.4977	-.1063	.0661
Mental Retardation	(15)	.1925	.3808	.0719	-.0669
VISTA	(10)	.3268	.3527	-.1576	.2002
Muscular Dystrophy	(17)	.1560	.3341	-.0098	.0958
Love	(19)	.1228	.3174	.0647	.0182
Pollution	(12)	.0067	.2240	-.0316	.0145
Peace Corps	(1)	.0865	.2010	.1294	.1074

TABLE 4 Continued

PSA Message	ID	Factor 3: (Establishment) 1	2	3	4
Drug Abuse	(4)	.0270	.0269	.6009	-.0023
Marine Corps	(8)	.1932	-.1952	.4533	-.0364
U. S. Savings Bonds	(5)	.0670	.0712	.4072	.3529
Handicapped	(3)	.1973	.1740	.2176	-.0381

PSA Message	ID	Factor 4: (Fear) 1	2	3	4
"Do Something" (PTA)	(21)	.2987	.1376	.1808	.3879
Car Theft	(7)	-.0732	-.0224	-.0325	.1940

TABLE 5

MEAN SCORES FOR 23 PSA COMMERCIALS

Commercial	ID	Mean Score[a]
Pollution	(12)	4.8
Forest Fires	(2)	4.7
Mental Retardation	(15)	4.6
Muscular Dystrophy	(17)	4.6
Love	(19)	4.6
Handicapped	(3)	4.5
Blasting Cap ID	(9)	4.5
Physical Fitness	(23)	4.5
United Nations	(20)	4.4
Car Theft	(7)	4.4
Better Teaching	(16)	4.2
Peace Corps	(1)	4.2
C. A. R. E.	(13)	4.1
Better Vision	(18)	3.9
Aging	(11)	3.9
Equal Employment	(6)	3.8
Bike Safety	(14)	3.6
Vietnamization	(22)	3.5
Drug Abuse	(4)	3.4
Vista	(10)	3.3
Savings Bonds	(5)	3.2
Marine Recruitment	(8)	2.5
PTA	(21)	2.4

[a]5=strongly agree; 4=agree somewhat;
3=neutral; 2=disagree somewhat; 1=disagree strongly

TABLE 6

SUMMARY OF RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN

AUDIENCE CHARACTERISTICS AND ESTABLISHMENT-ORIENTED

APPEALS IN PSA

Dependent Variables	r[a]	Variance (RSQ) Total	(Proportion)	df	Mean Square Regression	Residual	F
Fatalism	-.137	.01879	(20.4)	1/246	2.75	.58	4.71
Male Sex	-.222	.06849	(74.2)	2/245	6.39	.54	11.71
Age	.052	.00484	(5.1)	4/243	3.37	.55	6.16
Socio-economic Status	.014	.00020	(.3)	5/242	2.70	.55	4.92
TOTAL		.09232	(100)				

[a]= Correlation with dependent variable